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The (re)-politicisation of international relations in the post-Soviet space

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, the post-Soviet space has undergone remarkable changes: new conflicts have emerged, transnational infrastructures have been constructed, new institutions have been created and new security concerns have appeared. However, until relatively recently, scant attention has been paid to the significance of alternative approaches to geopolitics as an explanatory paradigm to assist in understanding the new changes in the post-Soviet space. The five articles in this Special Issue seek to fill this gap in the existing debate on foreign policy in the post-Soviet space, using a number of conceptual and methodological tools to shed light on the multiple forms of intertwined dynamics that are currently shaping relations across the region. They seek to facilitate a better understanding of previously observed, but unexplained and neglected, phenomena associated with the complexities of international relations in the post-Soviet space. This article serves as an introduction to the Special Issue “The (re)-politicisation of international relations in the post-Soviet space” and outlines the key research questions to which answers have been sought by experts.

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Despite the appearance of new actors in the wake of the breakup of the USSR that seemed to challenged Russian hegemony of the post-Soviet space, the country's ties to the region have remained strong, driven by a common language, shared history, and enduring economic, societal, cultural and political links. These enduring links with Russia, as well as geographic adjacency, mean that post-Soviet states remain vulnerable to pressure from external actors (e.g. the United States, Russia, and the EU). Over the last two decades, the post-Soviet space has undergone remarkable changes: new conflicts have emerged, transnational infrastructures have been constructed, new institutions have been created and new security concerns have appeared. These changes include the conflict in Georgia (2008) and in Ukraine (2014), the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (2014) and the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) (2009), operation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (2006) and construction of the Southern Gas Corridor, as well as the numerous projects associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

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In spite of these changes, asymmetric power relations between states remain common across the post-Soviet space. This is reflected in a lot of the literature on the foreign policy of post-Soviet states, which tends to focus on their relations with Moscow and the need to seek compromise as the weaker part of an asymmetrical relationship. Mouritzen (2017) proposes a strategy of “Finlandisation”¹ or “adaptive acquiescence” (making the best out of political and strategic dependence) for the smaller neighbours of strong regional powers with adjacent spheres of influence and suggests that post-Soviet states on the Russian periphery are worse off and will need to come to terms with their larger neighbour. The existing scholarship also tends to focus on the apparent competition between Russia and with external actors such as the EU, NATO, China and the US for influence in the post-Soviet space (Averre 2009; Bechev 2015; Tolstrup 2013). As a result, until relatively recently, scant attention has been paid to the significance of alternative approaches to geopolitics as an explanatory paradigm to assist in understanding foreign policy-making in the post-Soviet space (Petersen 2016).

The five articles in this Special Edition seek to fill this gap in the existing literature on foreign policy in the post-Soviet space, using a number of conceptual and methodological tools to illuminate the multiple forms of interconnected dynamics that are currently shaping relations across the region. They seek to facilitate a better understanding of previously observed, but unexplained and neglected, phenomena associated with the complexities of international relations in the post-Soviet space.

The principal focus of this Special Issue is Russia’s responses to the growing presence and influence of external actors across the post-Soviet space, which ranges from the western borders of Europe to Central Asia. The five articles explore conflict and cooperation through diverse and alternative frameworks and seek to identify key determinants of conflict, competition and cooperation, with a particular focus on borders, energy, democratisation, security, infrastructure, conflict, and the role of external actors. How do regional actors conceptualise the “post-Soviet” space? Is there any commonality of understanding? What determines the politics of the region? How significant are national identities? To what extent is strategic cooperation defined by geographic location rather than interest? How do (regional) infrastructures promote strategies of cooperation and integration? Although the articles follow different formats and use diverse conceptual frameworks, several themes run through all of them. Firstly, they highlight the multiple conceptions of the post-Soviet space held by different actors, as a shared neighbourhood, a contested terrain or simply a transit zone between an emerging Asia and Europe. In so doing, the articles argue that understanding the post-Soviet space requires more than just a consideration of relations with Russia and/or the EU; other actors play noteworthy roles in determining whether the post-Soviet space is a shared neighbourhood or a battleground. Secondly, by discussing key institutional projects such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the European Union, they highlight how shared interests, regime identities and governance challenges do not necessarily lead to similar conclusions about the appropriate institutional architecture to address them.

The findings of the articles in this Special Issue suggest that a more cautious approach is required when evaluating the complex dynamics in the post-Soviet space. The five articles provide significant empirical and conceptual observations on a number of critical topics: regime identity, values and norms, transnational infrastructures, identity stereotypes, overlapping institutions and territorial security. For example, Heller illustrates

how regime identity shapes the pathway of Eurasian economic integration. Applying a flat ontology as an innovative way to bridge interests and ideas as factors that influence authoritarian foreign policies and cooperation, her article traces the enabling and constraining effects of regime identities in Russia and Kazakhstan on the integration process within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The empirical results show that, while in the institutionalisation phase, Russia and Kazakhstan were able to reconcile the EAEU project with their – in many respects – diverging regime identities and visions about Eurasian economic integration, the Ukraine crisis significantly changed this equilibrium as it amplified the differences in regime identities and constructions of post-Soviet regional order. This triggered a negative chain reaction, resulting in a (re)production of previous bad practices of regional cooperation and weakening of the superficial ideational consensus on the EAEU.

Kobayashi also examines the EAEU, exploring the normative limits of functional cooperation in the post-Soviet neighbourhood. He argues that although both the EU and the EAEU address common governance challenges in the region, there has been no institutional-level cooperation between the two unions. This marked absence of cooperation on common regional and transnational challenges stands in stark contrast to the propositions of (neo)functionalist/rational institutionalist theories, which predict that technical cooperation on common policy challenges can emerge even amongst political actors who are hostile to each other. Kobayashi advances a social constructivist explanation to this puzzling phenomenon of non-cooperation and argues that actors entrapped in normative conflicts are likely to refuse functional cooperation even when there are potential mutual gains. In this vein, the article explores the often-neglected intersection between constructivist and rationalist theories and traces the origin of non-cooperation to the diverging normative visions put forth by different regional states.

The next two articles entitled *Great Game Visions and the Reality of Cooperation around Post-Soviet Transnational Infrastructure Projects in the Caspian Sea Region and Securing a Spot Under the Sun? Gas and Renewables in the EU-Russian Energy Transition Discourse*, shift perspective from institutions to the actors (state and non-state) involved in the energy sectors and transnational infrastructures. Bayramov argues that the complexities of the Caspian Sea region and the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline are only narrowly understood and explained by the geopolitical literature. He calls for the literature and discourse to move beyond the paradigm of new “Great Game” politics in the Caspian Sea. In an attempt to address these shortcomings and to propose an alternative reading of transnational infrastructures, Bayramov examines the case of the BTC pipeline, using insights from functionalism to explain the three phases of the project: planning of the pipeline; construction of the pipeline; and, use of the pipeline. The core argument presented is that the BTC project is much more than a power resource; it is the core medium of interaction for international and regional actors (governmental, non-governmental and intergovernmental) because of the number of connections that it facilitates in a highly contingent world. In contrast to Great Game assumptions, this article argues that transnational infrastructures are not necessarily negative or positive; rather, it is important to view their contribution, mixed impacts and limitations as part of a broader picture. In this sense, the article aims to situate the BTC infrastructure within the wider political, economic and social analysis of the Caspian Sea region.

Marusyk focuses on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project. Through an analysis of natural gas as a transitional fuel to renewables and evaluation of the potential that the EU-Russian discourse has in energy transition, her article addresses energy cooperation in the International Gas Union (IGU) and sets its sight on the geopolitics of energy transition in the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA). The understanding of the institutional setting is based on synthesising a constructivist theoretical approach. By moving beyond state-centrism, the article attempts to answer whether there is a clash of values and norms between the EU and Russia within these two global institutional settings – the IGU and the IRENA. It has been argued that the structure of an international organisation strongly influences the rules of the game and it is possible to anticipate the behaviour of the actors within the structure. Marusyk concludes that sovereignty and geopolitical debates will prevail in the intergovernmental organisation, while a commercial/market-oriented discourse will dominate in the non-governmental organisation.

The final article, by Goes, explores the Arctic, examining the connections between the Russian state and territory from a security perspective. Concepts of state, territory and space are critically interrogated with the use of Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage thinking. The article introduces striated and smooth space as analytical concepts revealing connections between the state and territory. Analysis reveals the state's attempt to capture the Arctic space in terms of state security and border protection. Based on the example of local security practices in the Murmansk region, Goes concludes that an understanding of security cannot be reduced to the borders of the nation-state.

In sum, while the external powers are one of the important elements in analysing foreign policy development in the post-Soviet states, the five articles in the special issue also point to the role of intergovernmental organisations, transnational infrastructures, regime identity, values and norms. The diversity of conceptual and methodological tools presented in this special issue enable us to understand how the post-Soviet space is a site for conflict, cooperation or the accommodation of overlapping interests.

Note

1. Mouritzen's concept of "Finlandisation" derives from Finland's foreign policy from 1944 to 1991, when it adapted to the defensive security interests of USSR in northern Europe, while maintaining a version of neutrality as well as shielding a flourishing Western democracy (Mouritzen 2017).

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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